WestEd
POLICY BRIEF
March 2004

K–18 Reform

School & College Partnerships
THE MISSING LINK

K–12 and higher education have long stood as silos. The separation has become increasingly untenable, with more-stringent state and federal accountability requirements for K–12 systems underscoring longstanding complaints from both sides: "You're sending us teachers not prepared for real classrooms" and "You're sending us students not ready for college."

Now a decade-long trend toward bridging the chasm is gaining traction. One reason is tight budgets: mismatched curricula, assessments, and instruction across systems create costly inefficiencies. More fundamentally, nationwide goals of improving student learning and narrowing the achievement gap get stymied by cross-system incoherence.

This Policy Brief examines the problems created by lack of K–16 alignment and identifies various local partnerships and systemic collaborations that are making a difference for students, their teachers, and their colleges. Additionally, a number of policy recommendations derived from these early successes are offered in support of increased K–16 collaboration and coherence.

The Challenge

Many believe that a smooth path from preschool through postsecondary education is critical to the goals of K–12 excellence and equity. But at present, transitions between the educational levels remain bumpy, creating frustrations and costs for students, systems, and society.

The problems fall into two major categories:

Lack of cross-system alignment. With complex societies and a global economy, some form of postsecondary education is becoming a 21st century essential. Today's workforce demands, college or no, require that high school students master college-prep levels of rigor. Some 75% of today's increasingly diverse high school graduates go on to college.[1] But more than a fourth fail to return for a second year, and more drop out after that.[2]

A key issue is that high schools and colleges have not developed common standards and expectations. While K–12 accountability policies are prompting course alignment and articulation from elementary through high school, the push for coherence tends to stop there. Colleges and universities are not held to account for coordinating with high schools.[3] Thus, in most places, high school exit exams and state-required tests are unrelated to college admission or placement tests.[4] While some state university systems have spelled out what courses students need to have taken for admission, those are rarely aligned with high schools' graduation requirements.

Admission, moreover, does not imply readiness. Some four-year state systems, required by statute to admit a percentage of each high school's graduates, find that many of these students need remedial English or math courses. Two-year community colleges, the point of entry for many underrepresented groups, have open enrollment, but they, too, place ill-prepared students in remediation.

Poor communication about academic requirements penalizes disadvantaged students disproportionately. More affluent students navigate the maze with parental help and, because they are in accelerated tracks, often receive more attention from counselors. Those whose parents did not go to college can miss the signals that define the college path.[5] They may realize too late that they have missed a prerequisite, like algebra in middle school, and be unable to catch up by senior year.

Students admitted to college are often stunned to find that, despite having passed high school exit exams and state tests, they have been placed in college remediation, meaning it will take longer and cost more to graduate. The college preparation they thought they got in high school turned out to be less than what is needed.[6] (Even students who suspect that their high school courses lack rigor do not know how to make up for it.[7]) Besides absorbing the cost of remediation classes,[8] colleges expend resources on numerous courses redundant with those taught in high school. This is especially notable in math since many students take no math in 12th grade and then need refresher courses in college.

Insufficient collaboration on teacher preparation. The federal *No Child Left Behind* act requires a highly qualified teacher in every K–12 classroom. Here, system interdependency is especially clear.[9] Teacher recruitment and preparation, especially of minority candidates, calls for joint K–12, community college,[10] and university strategies. Expertise shared across faculties can improve teaching at all levels, better ensuring all K–12 students a college-prep level of rigor — and a culture of high expectations — by improving curricula, assessment, and alignment. But a norm of institutional distance remains, and many professors do not see K–12 as scholarly. Professors, as a result, lack grounding in K–12 realities while K–12 teachers lack the connectedness they need to stay up to date on college admission and placement policies.[11]

Ways to Integrate the Systems

The most obvious starting place for bridging systems is the high school to college transition. Some key steps are being initiated by partnerships around the country:

- *Students take college placement tests for diagnostic purposes in middle school and early high school.* This allows students to see early and repeatedly where they need to focus their efforts for college entry without remediation.[12] Higher education regents in Oklahoma offer such testing for 8th and 10th graders, mindful that under-preparation starts in middle school.[13]
- *Performance on high school exams relates to college admission or placement decisions.* Several states are exploring linking high school exit exams to public college admission.[14] Such approaches can streamline the confusing mix of tests and help clarify college expectations for K–12 students and educators.[15] Oregon's university system is moving to base admissions on students' demonstrated mastery of knowledge and skills under the state's K–12 standards as evidenced by scores on state and national tests and high school assignments.[16] Such efforts create the often-lacking motivation for students to do well on state tests. However, if states tie their tests to minimum, rather than rigorous, standards, colleges will reject such linking.
- *Colleges share freshmen performance information with high schools.* High schools armed with data on how their graduates fare in college can use the information to improve student preparation. Postsecondary schools in some 21 states now provide such feedback, but how secondary schools use it is unclear.[17] One recent study found that high school staffs did not know how to use the data, had no time to figure it out, and received no help.[18]
- *Faculties cross systems.* When postsecondary professors work part-time in high schools and K–12 teachers also serve as teacher education faculty, teamwork blossoms. In Texas's highly successful El Paso Collaborative, such teams set high standards and aligned curriculum and assessment up and down the grades.[19] Cross-faculty teams in Long Beach, California, (see box) analyzed college English and math placement exams and revamped the high school curriculum to ensure alignment with those exams (given diagnostically to 11th and 12th graders).

Barriers

As the movement toward K–16 partnerships gains momentum, key obstacles must be overcome:

- *Lack of an organizational hub for K–16 policymaking and oversight.* At the state level, separate legislative committees and funding streams mitigate against K–16 policymaking and communication on such issues as funding, data sharing, teacher development, and matriculation.[20] Local partnerships are numerous, but levers for systemic collaboration are rare.[21]
- *Little incentive for postsecondary education*. Many universities have "outreach" programs offering tutoring or mentoring to poor and minority high schoolers. More unusual is a commitment that requires changes in postsecondary education itself. In most states, no market incentive exists; colleges have more than enough applicants. And motivational levers such as K–16 accountability systems or cross-sector funding mechanisms are generally absent. Governors and legislatures focus on K–12 but have considered higher education untouchable.[22] Partly, the incentive problem is internal: Higher education faculty are not rewarded for K–12 work. Notable exceptions include the University of Texas, El Paso, where President Diana Natalicio says, "We prepare teachers for the public schools, and we admit their students. So it's our problem just as much as theirs."[23]
- *Lack of funding.* Separate funding structures not only create disincentives to partner, but often place the systems in competition for limited dollars.

Policy Considerations

To foster cross-segment partnering, state, local, and institutional policymakers are focusing on one key task: changing incentives.

STATES

No state has a fully integrated preschool-through-university system.[24] But a number have set up statutory or voluntary governance structures wherein leaders across systems assume joint responsibility for K–16 outcomes. Experience supports certain priorities, including the following:

- *Plan as a system.* A K–16 plan provides a roadmap for crafting silo-bridging policies (e.g., funding allocations that reward cross-system teacher preparation programs). In California, a joint legislative committee has drafted a master plan for pre-K through college; the state's landmark 30-year-old master plan for postsecondary education would be folded in. Using a strategy pioneered in Georgia, some 22 states have joined a nationwide K–16 project wherein leaders from higher education, K–12, business, and the community take responsibility for coordinating reforms across systems.[25] State-level councils support local councils to enact the plans. In some states, business launches such efforts, as with Arizona's P-20 initiative.
- *Develop K–16 data systems.* To get vital information about how their students fare in each segment, institutions need — and states generally lack — a cross-segment achievement data system. Data should include common student identifiers across segments and be available quickly so that high schools can use the information. Colleges and high schools also need resources and incentives not just to share data, but to learn together how to use the information to improve policies and practices.[26]
- *Make no-stakes diagnostic testing part of the state testing program.* Starting in middle school, such testing would help communicate college-going expectations, define what college readiness means, and guide student and teacher efforts.

LOCAL AND INSTITUTIONAL

Across the country, local and regional partnerships are leading the way. Their actions include the following policies: [27]

- *Make CEOs of the local school district, university, and community college jointly accountable.* Shared responsibility for ensuring cross-segment alignment (e.g., on decisions such as changes in transfer policies) is critical.
- *Form cross-segment teacher preparation committees.* Teacher preparation programs should be overseen by a committee that includes faculty from arts and science (not just teacher education), community colleges, and K–12 schools.
- *Include K–14 and community voices in university admissions and placement planning.* Such participation opens cross-sector communication and leads to better-informed decisions.

CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY: MORE THAN OUTREACH

The California State University system must accept the top third of its state's high school graduates; more than half require remediation. To address this crisis, CSU negotiated with K–12 policymakers to enhance the 11th grade statewide test, then adopted that test as its own placement exam, becoming the first state system to use a state test for placement purposes.[28] The collaborative move clarifies expectations, saves testing time and costs, and motivates students with unacceptable scores to use the often-wasted 12th grade year for catch up. Individual CSU campuses, meanwhile, have their own K–16 partnerships, including:

Seamless education in Long Beach.[29] This 10-year partnership of CSU Long Beach, Long Beach Unified School District, and Long Beach City College focuses partly on alignment, as described above. Also, its emphasis on coherent exit and entry expectations and teacher preparation and development has resulted in such innovations as an interlinked program of teacher education between the university and the community college, with Long Beach Unified providing clinical experience. The curriculum is co-developed by the faculties, extensive co-teaching occurs, and the common structure and sequence ensure candidates a smooth transition from community college to university.[30] One upshot is that more credentialed teachers from the university now work in Long Beach Unified, where the number of emergency-credentialed teachers has dropped. And evidence exists of improved student achievement, the ultimate goal: the number of 5th graders reading at grade level rose from 6.7 percent in 1999 to 53.3 percent in 2002.[31]

College guarantee in San Diego.[32] Launched in 2001, a "Compact for Success" between San Diego State University (SDSU) and the Sweetwater Union High School District (grades 7–12) guarantees that any 7th grader who keeps a B average through 12th grade and completes all CSU prep requirements without need for remediation will be admitted to SDSU. Qualifying students in need will get a scholarship from a community-generated fund — important for the many low-income, Latino students in this border district. Students begin taking SDSU placement exams diagnostically in 10th grade. If they score well enough, SDSU waives its SAT requirement. The partners work jointly to promote awareness of the compact among students and families, sponsor campus experiences, ensure the requisite coursework and rigor across all district high schools, and ensure that those admitted to SDSU persevere and graduate. The district reports that B averages are up, and the compact has prompted families to move into the district.

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Endnotes

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[10] See also Lee-Bayha, J., & Villegas, M. (2003, October). *The changing role of community colleges* [Policy Brief]. San Francisco: WestEd. Available at http://www.WestEd.org/pub/docs/296

[11] Kirst, M., & Venezia, A. (in press). *Improving k–16 transition for broad access to postsecondary education*. Boston, MA: Jobs for the Future.

[12] Kirst & Venezia. *Bridging*.

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[16] Proficiency-Based Admission Standards System (PASS) Web site: http://www.ous.edu/pass/about/policy_report.html

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[22] Kirst & Venezia. *Bridging*.

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[24] State Higher Education Executive Officers. *Student Success*.

[25] "State K–16 Networks" is a project of the Education Trust and the National Association of System Heads. Information available at http://www.nashonline.org

[26] Kazis, et al.

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This brief, authored by Joan McRobbie, is issued by the WestEd Center on Policy (director, Paul Koehler). For more information about WestEd's policy work, call 415.615.3160 or visit www.WestEd.org/policy.

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This report was produced in whole or in part with funds from the Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education, under contract #ED-01-CO-0012. Its contents do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the Department of Education.

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